

**RETHINKING PEER FEEDBACK ON WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS:
PERSPECTIVES FROM TEACHERS AND STUDENTS**

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Abstract

This study surveys the opinions of both teachers and students involved in the Year 1 course "University English" in the Language Centre at City University of Hong Kong. The survey involved 265 students and 37 teachers. The issues studied were: 1) how useful is peer and teacher feedback? And 2) how effective are direct vs indirect approaches to providing teacher feedback? The students fell into two groups: 1) those students required to correct their language errors based on prompts provided by teachers either by pencil and paper comments or through the online software program "turnitin" vs 2) those students whose language errors were corrected by teachers either by pencil and paper comments or by using the Microsoft system "Track Changes". Major finding across the student population showed that: 1) there was no significant difference between students favoring teacher feedback and those who considered teacher and student feedback to be equally useful; similarly, the teacher population showed null significance in their perceptions of teacher vs peer feedback. And 2) significantly more students preferred teacher corrections with brief explanations than students who preferred making corrections based solely on teacher prompts. The teacher population, however, favored the opposite alternative. Qualitative analysis of questionnaire responses showed the matters students and teachers encountered with direct and indirect approaches to correction. (217 words)

Background

The value of peer feedback and the effectiveness of direct/ indirect feedback on students' essays have been the subjects of many research studies (e.g., Bate, Lane, & Lange, 1993; Bate, Lane, & Lange, 1993; Brown, 2007; Cohen, 1978; Ferris, 1995a, 1995b, 1999, 2003, 2006, 2010, 2011; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Frantzen, 1995; Frodesen, 1991; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994, 1996; Krashen, 1984; Lalande, 1982; Leki, 1990, 1991; Liu & Hansen, 2002; Radecki & Swales, 1988; Reid, 1998; Robb, Ross & Shortreed, 1986; Montgomery & Baker, 2007; Truscott, 1996, 1999; Zamel, 1985). *Direct feedback* refers to the form of error correction "when instructors provide the correct linguistic form for students – word, morpheme, phase, rewritten sentence, deleted word(s) or morpheme(s)" (Ferris, 2011, p.31). *Indirect feedback* "occurs when the teacher indicates that an error has been made but leaves it to the student writer to solve the problem and correct the error" (p.32).

Peer feedback is valued for allowing students to benefit from mutual help, to develop critical thinking skills, and to lighten teachers' workload (Ferris, 2003; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005; Liu & Hansen, 2002). Similarly, an indirect approach to correcting student's language mistakes is often advocated based on the argument that indirect feedback can help students develop self-editing strategies in the long term for having an opportunity to self-correct their own mistakes in grammar, paragraph structure and essay structure and to take responsibility for their own learning. Indirect feedback is also believed to be able to foster cognitive engagement, reflection, and problem-solving (Ferris, 1995c; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005) except possibly in situations when the errors are too complex in nature or when the L2 learners do not possess sufficient grammatical knowledge to self-correct their mistakes (Ferris, 1999; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Brown, 2007). Still, both empirical studies investigating peer feedback and indirect feedback tended to be inconclusive in claiming the effects of both forms of feedback. The usefulness of peer feedback, as noted by Ferris (2011), has not been supported by empirical evidence. Ferris states that there is still no empirical evidence supporting the assumptions that peer feedback "have value in helping students to edit their work and

improve the accuracy and clarity of their writing” (p.38). Similarly, the efficacy of indirect feedback varies in different studies. For example, in some studies, students receiving indirect feedback were found to perform significantly better than those who received direct feedback (Lalande, 1982; Frantzen, 1995). However, no significant difference was found between two groups of students receiving direct and indirect feedback (Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986). Ferris (2006) found that in the short term (i.e., between drafts of a paper), direct feedback produced better revision results (88% correct vs. 77% correct); yet in the long term (i.e., over one semester), indirect feedback helped students to produce less errors substantially than direct feedback.

The results of studies on indirect feedback and peer feedback are largely inconclusive probably because of complexity involved in the contexts of different studies investigating the efficacy of peer feedback and indirect corrective feedback. Some of these factors seem to be: 1) human factors, such as students’ English proficiency, students’ motivation to learn the target language; 2) nature of errors, 3) the explicitness of the prompts teachers give to alert students to the nature of errors; and 4) the availability of other supporting forms of error feedback, such as student-teacher conferences. Considering these variables, this study aims to investigate whether indirect feedback is preferred by both teachers and students in a language environment where the L2 learners who possessed a low level of English proficiency were required to write two academic essays under the constraint of a class size as big as 25 students and that of a duration as short as 15 minutes for a teacher-student consultation. To be specific, the aims of this study are two-pronged: a) to investigate the usefulness of peer feedback and the possible barriers to the success of using peer feedback to improve students’ writing, as seen by students and teachers, b) to investigate the usefulness of direct and indirect approaches to correcting language errors and the problems encountered by both students and teachers.

Significance of this study

Given the time constraint of a teacher-student consultation and the class size of 25 students, it would be of significance to investigate the usefulness of peer feedback and direct/indirect feedback, as perceived by L2 learners who had scored only Grade E and

Grade D in the Hong Kong A-Level Examination in the subject of English, on helping them to meet the course requirements for completing two academic essays (one was to analyze the causes/consequences of a problem, and the other was to make an argumentative proposal). Hopefully, the findings could shed light on a workable way for students to benefit from peer feedback and direct/indirect feedback and for teachers to handle language errors that might work well with L2 students, especially those possessing a similar level of proficiency in English as those taking the course University English in this study.

Methodology

Research tool

Two questionnaires were developed. One was the student version while the other was the teacher version. The student version (Appendix A) contained twelve questions, and the teacher version contained 13 questions (Appendix B).

Participants

This study involved 265 native Cantonese-speaking Year 1 students who had scored Grade E or Grade D in the Hong Kong A-Level Examination in the subject of English. These L2 learners of English took the 36-hour course “University Gateway English” (hereafter referred to as GE) at the City University of Hong Kong in the first semester in 2011-12. The course lasted twelve weeks. Students were required to complete two writing assignments. The first one was to analyze the causes/effects of a problem (700 to 900 words), and the second one was to convince the reader that one of three proposed solutions to the problem identified in the first writing task would be the best one (900 to 1200 words).

The 37 EFL teachers in this study taught in the English Language Centre at the City University of Hong Kong teaching mainly three courses – University Gateway English, English for Academic Purposes, and English for Academic Purposes Foundation. According to the personal information supplied at the end of the questionnaire, the

profiles of the teachers are as follows (some teachers did not supply all the information listed on the questionnaire, resulting in the total numbers of some categories not equal to the total number of all participants):

Fifteen participants speak the British variety of English as their first language; five speak the American variety of English; two speak the Australian variety of English; one speaks the Canadian variety of English; Thirteen do not speak English as their first language: twelve speak Cantonese, and one speaks French. There were fourteen males and 18 females. The teachers have taught English at the tertiary level for an average of 12 years. Seven teachers are in the age range of 25-35 and 36-45; thirteen teachers are in the range of 46-55; one is in the range of 56-65.

Procedure

Copies of the student-version of a questionnaire containing twelve questions distributed in class for GE students to complete on a voluntary basis towards the end of the second semester in 2011-12. Students were allowed fifteen minutes to complete the questionnaire. A total of 14 classes participated in the study, involving 265 students, accounting for 36.5% of all GE students ($265/727 = 36.5\%$). Copies of the teacher version of the questionnaire containing thirteen questions were distributed and completed on a Teacher Development Day in May 2011, involving 37 teachers who participated in the study on a voluntary basis. Participants were given fifteen minutes to complete the questionnaire, but they could submit the questionnaire at the end of the TD day if they wished to use more time for the questionnaire. Alternatively, they could choose not to submit the questionnaire at all. Most of the teachers submitted questionnaire within fifteen minutes, but two of them submitted the questionnaire at the end of TD Day and two submitted the questionnaire the following day.

Both student and teacher data were subjected to quantitative and qualitative analysis. Frequency counts were performed using the SSPS program 19.0 and proportional t-test; qualitative analysis was performed manually for Questions 5 and 6 based on recurring themes.

Results

Student data

Question 1

There was no significant difference between students favoring teacher feedback 56.2% and those who considered teacher and student feedback to be equally useful (49.1%) at the 99% confidence level ($z=1.64$).

Question 2

Significantly more students believed that feedback on organization was the most important (44.3%) than students who believed that feedback on grammar was the most important (12.9%) at the 99% confidence level ($Z=7.86$).

Similarly, significantly more students believed that feedback on content was the most important (29.2%) than students who believed that feedback on grammar was the most important (12.9%) at the 99% confidence level ($Z=4.52$).

Significantly more students believed that feedback on organization was the most important (44.3%) than students who believed that feedback on content was the most important (29.2%) at the 99% confidence level ($Z=3.54$).

Question 3

The majority of students (87.9%) believed that they could understand the suggestions made by their classmates and could make corrections accordingly.

Question 4

The majority of students (94%) of respondents indicated that they could understand the suggestions made by their teacher and make corrections accordingly.

Question 7

Most students preferred seeing feedback in some combination of both oral and written

feedback (74.7%).

Significantly more students prefer feedback in writing only (17.4%) than students who preferred oral feedback only (7.2%) at the 99% confidence level ($z=3.57$).

Question 8

Most students preferred a teacher-student consultation session to take place in the mode of one teacher with one student (75.8%).

Question 9

The majority of students (80.4%) held the opinion that the teacher should talk more, guiding the consultation by giving advice and comments in a teacher-student consultation.

Question 10

Most students (76.6%) believed that they are free to decide whether to take my teacher's advice.

Question 11

Significantly more students (35.8%) preferred their teacher to write corrections directly in my essay with explanations (though the explanations may be brief) than did students (20.8%) who preferred their teacher to underline the mistakes and provide some hints (like asking a question) for them to think about and help them to try to correct my own mistakes at the 99% confidence level ($z=3.77$).

Qualitative analysis:

Question 5 – Problems in acting on classmate's comments and strategies

Problems (percentage of students)	Strategies
Communication problems <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Not easy to understand the essay of my classmates in a short time, so it is not	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I would ask for examples;• Ask teachers;• Find my classmates to have further

<p>easy to give useful comments. (5%)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I do not know what the essay is talking about. (4%) • Some points they made maybe not be clear enough. (2%) • They may not understand or misunderstand my point. (3%) • Some classmates did not give comments. (1%) • Sometimes, my classmate's level is much higher than mine, so I do not see any mistakes in his/her essay. (1%) 	<p>discussion;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I will explain more to them.
<p>Quality of feedback</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not enough feedback/ the feedback not thorough. (3%) • Sometimes, they give only general comments like "good". I can't get specific comments. (2%) • They do not know what is wrong with my essay or what corrections to be made. (1%) • Sometimes, my classmate's level is much higher than mine, so I do not see any mistakes in his/her essay. (1%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I will explain more to them.
<p>Difficulty in reacting to peer comments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not agree with their comments. (3%) • It is difficult to follow since there are some conflicts in ideas. (1%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use critical thinking skills to analyze whose ideas are more convincing. • Accept as long as I think that is true; otherwise, I ask my teacher to figure it out.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sometimes, I don't know whether their comments are correct. (3%) • I can understand the comments but may not be able to fully adjust my writing in the way they want. (1%) • I can't focus on the word on the screen. (1%) 	
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Findings of Question 6 – Problems in acting on your teacher's comments and strategies (For the teacher who provided corrections directly on students' essays)

Problems (percentage of students)	indicating this problem
Communication problems <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers may misunderstand my meaning in the essay (2%); • Do not understand (2%); • Hard to understand exactly why she suggested it (1%); • They may state the problem indirectly. (1%); 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I will explain my point when it is misunderstood by my teacher;
Difficulty in reacting to teacher comments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I may not know why I have to do a particular correction (2%). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Argue or accept it without understanding; • Directly correct it and usually accept the teacher's ideas because s/he is the one who gives marks.
Time constraint <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time is limited in the consultation. (1%) 	

Question 6

Problems in acting on your teacher's comments and strategies (For the teacher who provided prompts only for students to correct their own mistakes)

Problems (percentage of students)	Strategies
Communication problems <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sometimes they do not write much and it does not help much. (1%) • Some sentence structure and phrases were not appropriate, but I did not know the proper way to re-write it. (2%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask for clarification or follow-up questions when it is not clear; • I will be well-prepared for the questions that I really do not understand and ask my teacher. • Think about the teachers' words for a long time.
Difficulty in reacting to teacher comments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is hard to remember what my teacher needs me to correct. It is better to jot notes during consultation (1%); • I find it hard to completely fulfill my teachers' comments (1%). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try to make as many corrections as possible.
Time constraint <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There may be too much to discuss and remember within 15 minutes (1%). 	

Teacher data

Quantitative analysis

Question 1

The teacher population showed null significance in their perceptions of teacher vs peer feedback (56.2% for teachers favoring teacher feedback; 41.1% for teachers who considered teacher and student feedback to be equally useful) at the 99% confidence level ($z=1.30$).

Question 2

There was no significant difference between teachers who believed that feedback on organization is the most important (27%) and those who believed that feedback on grammar was the most important (13.5%) at the 95% confidence level ($z=1.44$).

There was no significant difference either between teachers who believed that feedback on content is the most important (16.2%) and those who believed that feedback on grammar was the most important (13.5%) at the 95% confidence level ($z=0.33$).

There was no significant difference either between teachers who believed that feedback on content is the most important (16.2%) and those who believed that feedback on organization was the most important (27%) at the 95% confidence level ($z=1.13$).

Question 3:

Sentence fragments (frequency count = 15), word choice (frequency count = 9), modal verbs (frequency count = 9), and sentence connectors (frequency count = 8) constitute the top four categories of language errors that teacher think should receive teachers' top priority attention if teachers aim to improve students' academic literacy.

Question 4:

There was no significant difference between teachers who believed that their students understand the suggestions made by their classmates and make corrections accordingly (45.9%) and those who were not sure about the efficacy of peer feedback (35.1%) at the 95% confidence level ($z=0.95$).

Question 5:

There was no significant difference between teachers who believed that their students understand the suggestions made by teachers and make corrections according (51.4%) and those who were not sure about the efficacy of teacher feedback (37.8%) at the 95% confidence level ($z=0.95$).

For the former, reasons for their confidence in the effectiveness of their written comments include: a) providing students with a correction code, b) providing students with correct answers, c) giving explanations in teacher-student consultations. For the latter, reasons for teachers' uncertainty over the effectiveness of their written comments include: a) students seem to understand or agree to teachers' comments, but they do not know how to make corrections, b) students may misunderstand my suggestions or comments, c) the effectiveness of teachers' comments depends on students' ability and attitude; and d) complicated errors such as those about organization and content hard to explain in written comments.

Question 8

An overwhelming majority of teachers (91.9%) preferred feedback to be given in a mode that involves a combination of both written and oral feedback.

Question 9

There was no significant difference between teachers who preferred a teacher-student consultation session to take place in the mode of one teacher with one student (43.2%) and the teachers who preferred the mode of one teacher with two students (40.5%) at the 95% confidence level ($z=0.24$).

Question 10

There was no significant difference between teachers who held the opinion that, in a teacher-student consultation, the teacher should talk more, guiding the consultation by giving advice and comments (43.2%) and those who thought that the student should talk more, guiding the consultation by initiating questions (40.5%) at the 95 confidence level ($z=0.24$).

Question 11

Most teachers (89.2%) believed that students are free to decide whether to take their teacher's advice.

Question 12

Most teachers (64.9%) preferred using an indirect approach when dealing with the grammatical mistakes in their students' writing assignments in the context of having only fifteen minutes for a teacher-student consultation. Among this group of teachers, 83.3% of teachers (20 out of 24 teachers) would like to underline the mistakes and provided some hints (like asking a question) for a student to think about and urge him/her to try to correct his/her own mistakes; 16.7% of teachers (4 out of 24) would like to only underline the mistakes for a student to correct his/her own mistakes.

Qualitative analysis

Questions 6

The problems that teachers have in providing written feedback to their students and their strategies for dealing with the problems include:

Problems (percentage of teachers)	Strategies
Physical problems giving paper-and-pen comments: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Poor or illegible handwriting (3/37=8%);• Insufficient space in the margin to write comments (2/37=5.4%).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consider typing up the comments;• Consider using online program like "Turnitin".
Time constraint: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Insufficient time for marking due to too many errors in an essay, too many students in one class (17/37=45.9%).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Focus mainly on content and organization;• Give limited feedback;• Focus on serious errors;• Work in pairs;• Write only one paragraph;• Sacrifice my own time.
Motivational concern:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Prioritize errors;

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Worry about demoralizing students if too many corrections (2/37=5.4%). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mark only one or two types of errors intensively rather than marking all types of errors.
<p>Communication problems</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hard to make students understand what is wrong with their answers for some kinds of mistakes like coherence and sentence structures. These kinds of mistakes require lengthy explanations, which are difficult to explain in written comments (1/37=10.8%); Not easy to understand what students want to say (3/37=8.1%); Need to explain short forms used clearly (1/37=2.7%). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Give students the answers directly because this is easier to do; Write the correct sentences for them and try to explain in person; Make guesses; Ask them to explain in Cantonese or Putonghu, if necessary; Acclimatize students to the teacher's particular suggestions about or hints at mistakes; Students should know what features teachers are looking for. The marking scheme can help; Do sentence deconstruction exercise.
<p>Uncertainty about the effectiveness of both indirect and direct approaches to giving feedback:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not sure if students can learn anything if a teacher corrects everything, and not sure either if a student can make corrections themselves if only symbols are given (1/37=2.7%). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Re-write parts of the sentence and require students to complete the remaining part.
<p>Pressure from meeting students' expectations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students expect direct corrections from teachers (1/37=2.7%). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide some but not all direct corrections.

Question 7

The problems that teachers have in providing oral feedback to their students and their strategies for dealing with the problems include:

Problems (percentage of students)	Strategies
Time constraint: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not enough time to go through all the points in the written comments (6/37=16.2%); • Too many explanations because of too many serious errors (4/37=10.8%); • Consultation becomes too long (1/37=2.7%); 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide students with a check list; • Let students read my written feedback first and ask them to ask the teacher what is not clear; • Sacrifice my own time.
Communication problems <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students' confidence level is so low that they are listening to what you are saying (1/37=2.7%); • Students insist that they are right. Or they can't see the weaknesses of their assignments (1/37=2.7%); • Students rely on teacher-driven feedback and relinquish their responsibility (1/37=2.7%); • Oral feedback is not taken as seriously as written feedback (1/37=2.7%); • Students cannot remember all the issues discussed (3/37=8.1%); • The teacher talked too much(1/37=2.7%); • Students feel shy to ask questions(1/37=2.7%); 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To minimize this, try to first say that students have done well; • Need to have something written down for them; • Simplify the English I use; • Oral feedback is only in support of written feedback.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students do not understand my English (5/37=13.5%). 	
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Summary of quantitative findings

- Both the teacher and student populations regarded peer feedback and teacher feedback to be equally important.
- Significantly more students believed that feedback on organization was the most important, while teachers held the view that feedback on grammar, content and organization are equally important.
- Sentence fragments, word choice, modal verbs, and sentence connectors constitute the top four categories of language errors that teachers think should receive teachers' top priority attention if teachers aim to improve students' academic literacy.
- The majority of students (87.9%) believed that they could understand the suggestions made by their classmates and could make corrections accordingly. However, less than half of the teachers (45.9%) thought that peer feedback was helpful to students in terms of correcting the errors of their essays and about 35% of teachers indicated that they did not think their students understood the comments by their classmates and make corrections accordingly.
- The majority of students (94%) believed that they could understand the suggestions made by their teachers and could make corrections accordingly. Nonetheless, there was no such a dominant pattern in the teacher population. For teachers who were confident that their students could make of their written comments effectively gave reasons such as supplying students with correct answers and using the oral feedback consultations to explain their written comments. For teachers who were not sure about the effectiveness of their written comments expressed their concerns as follows: a) students may misunderstand their comments/suggestions and/or do not know how to make corrections, b) complicated errors such as those about organization and content hard to explain in written comments.

6. Most teachers and students preferred a combination of oral and written feedback. While most students preferred both written and oral feedback, significantly more students preferred written feedback only than did students who preferred oral feedback only among those who chose either written or oral feedback.
7. The majority of students preferred a teacher-student consultation session to take place in the mode of one teacher with one student, but teachers did not show such a dominant pattern. Instead, about half teachers preferred the mode of one teacher with one student and half teachers preferred that of one teacher with two students.
8. The majority of students held the opinion that, in a teacher-student consultation, the teacher should talk more, guiding the consultation by giving advice and comments. However, no dominant pattern appeared in the teacher population -- teachers who thought that teachers should talk more did not differ significantly from those who thought that students should talk more.
9. Both teachers and students believed that students are free to decide whether to take their teachers' advice.
10. Most teachers preferred using an indirect approach when dealing with the grammatical mistakes in their students' writing assignments in the context of having only fifteen minutes for a teacher-student consultation; however, significantly more students preferred their teacher to write corrections directly in my essay with explanations (though the explanations may be brief) than did students who preferred their teacher to underline the mistakes and provide some hints (like asking a question) for them to think about and help them to try to correct their own mistakes.

Summary of qualitative findings

1. The problems students have in acting on their classmates' comments include communication problems, unsatisfactory peer feedback, and difficulty in reacting to peer comments.
2. The problems students have in acting on their teachers' comments include communication problems, difficulty in reacting to teacher comments, and time constraint.

3. The problems that teachers have in providing written feedback to their students and their strategies for dealing with the problems include: physical problems giving paper-and-pen comments, time constraint, motivational concern, communication problems, uncertainty about the effectiveness of both indirect and direct approaches to giving feedback, and pressure from meeting students' expectations.
4. The problems that teachers have in providing oral feedback to their students and their strategies for dealing with the problems include: time constraint, communication problems.

Discussion and Conclusion

There are two major limitations in this study. First, how the 37 teachers who participated in this study gave direct and indirect feedback was not monitored. For example, it is unknown whether they provided *unfocused feedback* or *focused feedback*. Unfocused feedback is targeted to "specific error types in the text without a preconceived feedback approach in mind" while focused feedback "starts with the student's most frequent error pattern, as demonstrated at the beginning of a course, providing systematic feedback (and supplementary instruction) on those error patterns, and tracking changes over time (Ferris, 2011, p.30). It is unknown either how explicit the feedback the teachers who provided indirect feedback was. Did they use *uncoded feedback* (in which they just underlined or circled a mistake and left it to a student to diagnose and correct the mistake, p.34) or *coded feedback* (in which they used sort of abbreviations to indicate the type of error, p.34)? The above-mentioned two concerns might have influenced a student's preference for direct or indirect feedback. Another limitation is that there was not accurate recording of the actual time all teacher participants spent on a teacher-student consultation. It is possible that a teacher has used more than fifteen minutes, which is only a rough estimate of time based on the number of students in a class and the total amount of time allocated to teacher-student consultations. The time and attention a teacher can give a student might also influence a student's preference for direct/indirect feedback.

While the limitations of this study restrict the generalizability of the findings obtained regarding the divergence in the perceptions between students and teachers, there has been sufficient demonstration of overlaps with other research presented in the review of the literature to call attention to some implications of this research in the following regards: a) setting priorities when deciding what to focus on in marking students' essays and in the student-teacher consultations; b) determining whether to incorporate peer feedback in the writing process; and c) re-thinking whether there is a need to accommodate the preference of L2 students in this study for direct feedback.

Setting priorities when deciding what to focus on when marking students' essays and in the student-teacher consultations

Significantly more students in this study believed that feedback on organization and content was the most important than did students who believed that grammar was the important. This finding is in agreement with the conclusion in other studies that students indicated that they valued feedback of all types, not just on language errors (Ferris, 1995b; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994, 1996; Montgomery & Baker, 2007). However, most teachers in this study held the opinion that grammar, content, and organization were equally important. Although teachers in this study believed that feedback on grammar was as important as that on the other two aspects, they might consider setting their priorities on marking organization and content rather than on grammatical mistakes for the following reasons: a) teachers' marking workload would be heavily increased if all grammatical mistakes were dealt with; and b) it would be too ambitious to aim at helping students write sentences free of grammatical mistakes in the 36-hour G.E. course by correcting their mistakes or by having students correct their own mistakes.

If teachers wish to touch upon the language errors of an essay within the time available in a lesson and in a teacher-student consultation, the following four grammatical categories, indicated by the teachers in this study to be the most important four grammatical structures for improving students' academic literacy, might deserve a teacher's top priority attention: sentence fragments, modal verbs, sentence connectors, and word choice. The four categories indicated by the teachers in this study can be classified as

global errors, though the classification would not be undisputable because, as Hendrickson (1978) gave examples that could be classified as both categories. According to Burt and Kiparsky (1972), *global errors* interfere with the comprehensibility of a text, whereas *local errors* do not impede understanding. The indication of these four categories reflect that the teacher participants' preferences for selective treatment of errors are in line with the criterion of the seriousness of errors, which seems to be a common consideration among teaching practitioners who prefer a focused approach versus an unfocused approach.

Determining whether to incorporate peer feedback in the writing process

The majority of students in this study believed that they could understand the suggestions made by their classmates and make corrections accordingly. However, about 35.1% of teachers in this study did not think that their students could understand the comments given by their classmates and make corrections accordingly, and less than of the teachers (45.9%) believed peer feedback was useful to students. While the lack of confidence on the part of teachers on the usefulness of feedback is in agreement with the general argument that activities on peer feedback are like "the blind leading the blind" (Ferris, 2011, p.147), the difference in perceptions between students and teachers have posed interesting questions from a pedagogical point of view. From students' point of view, learning had taken place, but their classroom teacher did not feel that students had benefited from peer feedback. Was it because students just gave oral feedback without putting their comments on their peers' essays, which might be the major source for a teacher to evaluate how useful a student's feedback on his/her classmate's essay was? Would it be possible that the lack of opportunities for a classroom teacher to listen in detail to all the conversations going on in pairs/groups had caused him/her to form the opinions that peer feedback was not useful? Would it be possible that students nowadays prefer talking to writing when giving peer feedback? Their reluctance to write, in turn, might be due to their poor English proficiency or due to their general dislike for writing in English. Future research could investigate the preferred channel(s) of communication for students to give feedback to their peers. It seems that teachers need to be aware of the opinions exchanged between classmates in channels other than the written medium in a

session designated for the peer-feedback activity. Teachers' diffidence in the usefulness of peer feedback might result in a self-fulfilling prophecy – not encouraging peer feedback or not designing class activities that can work to train students to give useful peer feedback, resulting in a truly unproductive peer feedback session.

Re-thinking whether there is a need to accommodate the preference of L2 students in this study for a direct approach to corrections

While most teachers preferred using an indirect approach when dealing with the grammatical mistakes in their students' writing assignments in the context of having only fifteen minutes for a teacher-student consultation, significantly more students preferred their teachers to write corrections directly in their essays with explanations (though the explanations may be brief) than did students who preferred their teachers to underline the mistakes and provide some hints (like asking a question) for them to think about and help them to try to correct their own mistakes. Prompting students to correct their own mistakes may give students opportunities to think about their mistakes, but the success of this process would seem to depend to a great extent on the time available to discuss with students the appropriateness of their corrections and to guide them to get the correct expressions. As indicated by 37.8% of the teachers in this study, they were not certain whether whether students could understand the written comments they provided. This percentage is not low compared with the percentage of teachers who believed that their students understand the suggestions made by teachers and make corrections according (51.4%). The teachers who were not sure about the effectiveness of their written comments expressed concerns such as students' language ability, motivation to learn English and time available to explain the nature of some complicated errors (e.g., those involving sentence structures, coherence). Considering that an indirect approach is time-consuming and that the limited amount of time a teacher can spend after class to discuss with a student about his/her language errors, it seems that there is a need for teachers to re-think whether an indirect approach is an approach that can work well with students who have scored Grade E or Grade D in the HK A-Level examinations in the subject of English. As some students indicated in their comments about the difficulty they had in making corrections based on their teachers' prompts, they did not know how to make

corrections despite knowing the nature of their mistakes after seeing their teachers' prompts. The myth that indirect feedback is superior to directive feedback in general, as indicated by the majority of teacher respondents in this study, might need to be reconsidered taking into account the actual limitations of the language context of the course University English and the preference of the majority of students for direct corrective feedback. Ignoring students' preferences and expectations might lead to anxiety and frustrations and the loss of confidence in their teachers (Ferris, 2011, p.42).

While an indirect approach may not benefit students with a poor proficiency level of English, the direct approach in which teachers supply the correct answers is not without its problems. Some students indicated that they did not know why the expressions they wrote in their essays were regarded as wrong by their teachers and that they even did not understand the reasons for the corrections provided by their teachers. Their coping strategies included direct copying the teacher's answers without understanding because, as some students indicated in the questionnaire, that teachers are the one to give the marks.

In view of the inadequacies of both approaches to marking students' errors, one workable way might be to set priorities regarding what language errors to focus on and to use a combination of both the direct approach and indirect approach depending on the nature of mistakes, students' language proficiency and the time available for teacher-students consultations. To enable a teacher to adopt such a flexible approach to handling students' language errors, contextual variables need to be taken into account. For example, the objectives of a writing course should be realistic in terms of what students can learn to accomplish in a course as short as 36 hours by factoring in variables, such as the English proficiency level of students and their need to use English for their current and future study/work. In addition to setting appropriate course objectives, it would be also be important to set up effective assessment criteria that match course objectives and that are based on realistic expectations of what students can achieve within their ability after taking the course. The generic features of a standard academic essay could only be used as reference in designing a marking scheme for a writing course; adjustments will have to

be made based on the actual language ability of students and the time constraints of a course. Only when such favorable global factors exist can teachers fully use their discretion in providing teacher feedback in a way that can truly benefit a student; also only when such factors exist can a teacher accurately assess how useful teacher and peer feedback is in helping students to improve their writing quality.

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APPENDIX A QUESTIONNAIRE (STUDENT VERSION)

Dear Students,

Please complete this questionnaire collecting your views on the way your classmates and I gave you feedback on your first writing assignment. Your opinions will be of great value in helping my research study on the effectiveness of teacher and peer feedback on improving students' writing. You do not have to provide your name on this questionnaire. Please circle your answers that truly reflect your thoughts.

Question 1: Whose feedback would you prefer?

- a) Teacher feedback
- b) Student feedback
- c) Teacher feedback and student feedback are of equal importance
- d) Others (Please specify: _____)

Question 2: What kind of feedback do you think is the most important?

- a) Grammar
- b) Organization (including paragraph coherence)
- c) Content
- d) Others (Please specify: _____)

Question 3: Did you pay attention to the suggestions made by your classmate and made corrections accordingly?

- a) Yes. (Reasons: _____)
- b) No. (Reasons: _____)
- c) Others (Please specify: _____)

Question 4: Did you pay attention to the suggestions made by your teacher and made corrections accordingly?

- a) Yes. (Reasons: _____)
- b) No. (Reasons: _____)
- c) Others (Please specify: _____)

Question 5: What problems did you have in understanding your classmate's comments? What were your strategies for resolving these problems?

Question 6: What problems did you have in understanding your teacher's comments? What were your strategies for resolving these problems?

Question 7: Did you prefer seeing feedback in writing or oral feedback or a combination of both?

- a) Feedback in writing only (Reasons: _____)
- b) Oral feedback only (Reasons: _____)
- c) Some combination of both (Reasons: _____)
- d) Others (Please specify: _____)

Question 8: What kind of teacher-student consultation session would you prefer?

- a) Teacher with one student
Reasons: _____
- b) Teacher with two students
Reasons: _____
- c) Others (Please specify: _____)

Question 9: How would you like the teacher-student consultation to take place?

- a) The teacher should talk more, guiding the consultation by giving advice and comments.
- b) The student should talk more, guiding the consultation by initiating questions.
- c) Others (Please specify: _____)

Question 10: Do you think that you are free to take the teacher's advice or you SHOULD follow the teacher's advice although you don't agree to it?

- a) I think that I am free to decide whether to take my teacher's advice.
- b) I think that the teacher's advice is always right, so I should follow his/her advice although I don't really understand or agree to it.
- c) Others (Please specify: _____)

Question 11: When I corrected your outline, I provided a topic sentence and the mini topic sentences (i.e., sentences introducing the sub-points within a paragraph) for your reference when yours are problematic. Do you think you can learn how to make an effective outline by observing the model sentences provided?

- a) Suggested outline is very useful
- b) Suggested outline is Useful
- c) Neutral
- d) Suggested outline is not useful
- e) Suggested outline is Counter-productive

Question 12: When I corrected your first draft, I provided correct answers to your grammatical mistakes rather than just underlining the mistakes for you to make the correction yourselves. How useful do you think this method is in helping you to write accurate English sentences in the future?

- a) Very useful
- b) Useful
- c) Neutral
- d) Not useful
- e) Counter-productive

Your further suggestions and comments are most welcome. You may use the attached blank page if you need additional space. Thank you!



The following personal information would help me interpret the findings of this study. I would be grateful if you could spend a moment to complete this part of the questionnaire as well.

Gender: Male ____ Female ____

Age: _____

Major: _____

City where you received your secondary education:

Grade in the Use of English in HK AL: _____
(Year obtaining the exam results: _____)

Exam results of other English proficiency tests (if applicable): _____
(Name of the English proficiency test(s): _____)
(Year obtaining the exam results: _____)

Thank you!

APPENDIX B QUESTIONNAIRE (TEACHER VERSION)

Dear GE/EAP/EAP Foundation Teachers,

I would be most grateful if you could complete this questionnaire collecting your views on peer and teacher feedback on the writing assignments of the course(s) you are teaching. Your opinions will be of great value in helping a research study on the effectiveness of teacher and peer feedback on improving students' writing. You do not have to provide your name on this questionnaire. Please provide only responses that actually reflect your thoughts.

You may use the blank page at the end of the questionnaire if you need additional space.

Question 1: Whose feedback do you think is more important for your students?

- e) Teacher feedback
- f) Student feedback
- g) Teacher feedback and student feedback are of equal importance
- h) Others (Please specify: _____)

Question 2: What kind of feedback do you think is the most important to your students?

- e) Grammar
- f) Organization (including paragraph coherence)
- g) Content
- h) Others (Please specify: _____)

Question 3: What language errors do you think should receive teachers' top priority attention if the aim is to help students improve their academic literacy? You might choose from the following list of common errors: modal verbs, sentence fragments, comma splices, word choices, tenses, sentence connectors (e.g., conjunctions, prepositions), in-text citation and referencing in APA style.

- a) _____ (the most important of all)
- b) _____ (the second most important)
- c) _____ (the third most important)

Question 4: (IF PEER FEEDBACK IS INCORPORATED IN THE WRITING PROCESS)

Do you think your students understand the suggestions made by their classmates and make corrections accordingly?

- d) Yes. (Reasons: _____)
- e) No. (Reasons: _____)
- f) Others (Please specify: _____)

Question 5: Do you think your students understand the suggestions made by you and make corrections accordingly?

- d) Yes. (Reasons: _____)
- e) No. (Reasons: _____)
- f) Others (Please specify: _____)

Question 6: What problems did you have in providing written feedback to your students? What were your strategies for taking actions on these problems?

Question 7: What problems did you have in providing oral feedback to your students? What were your strategies for taking actions on these problems?

Question 8: Did you prefer giving written feedback or oral feedback or a combination of both?

- e) Feedback in writing only (Reasons: _____)
- f) Oral feedback only (Reasons: _____)
- g) Some combination of both (Reasons: _____)
- h) Others (Please specify: _____)

Question 9: What kind of teacher-student consultation session would you prefer?

- d) Teacher with one student
Reasons: _____
- e) Teacher with two students
Reasons: _____
- f) Others (Please specify: _____)

Question 10: How would you like the teacher-student consultation to take place?

- d) The teacher should talk more, guiding the consultation by giving advice and comments.
- e) The student should talk more, guiding the consultation by initiating questions.
- f) Others (Please specify: _____)

Question 11: Do you think that students SHOULD be free to take the teacher's advice, or that they SHOULD follow the teacher's advice even though they may not agree with it?

- d) I think that students should be free to decide whether to take their teacher's advice.

- b) I think that the teacher's advice is always right, so students should follow his/her advice even though they don't really understand it or agree with it.

- c) Others (Please specify: _____)

Question 12: How would you like to deal with the grammatical mistakes in your students' writing assignments, considering the constraint that only about 15 minutes can be assigned to any one student in a teacher-student consultation?

- f) Ignore the grammatical mistakes
 Reasons: _____
- g) Write corrections to the mistakes directly in a student's essay
 Reasons: _____
- h) Write corrections directly in a student's essay with explanations, though the explanations may be brief
 Reasons: _____
- i) Underline the mistakes for a student to correct his/her own mistakes
 Reasons: _____
- j) Underline the mistakes and provide some hints (like asking a question) for a student to think about and urge him/her to try to correct his/her own mistakes
 Reasons: _____
- k) Others (Please specify: _____)

Question 13: Do you think the option you have chosen in Question 11 can help your students write more accurate English sentences in the future?

- a) Very useful (Reasons: _____)
- b) Useful (Reasons: _____)
- c) Neutral (Reasons for still choosing the option in Question 11: _____)
- d) Not useful (Reasons for still choosing the option in Question 11: _____)

The following personal information would help me interpret the findings deriving from this study. I would be grateful if you could spend a moment to complete this part of the questionnaire as well. Only aggregate information will appear in the report of findings, and you will NOT be identified.

Please tick as appropriate and fill in the blanks.

1. Which course(s) did you teach last semester?

- ☐ GE ☐ EAP ☐ EAP Foundation

2. What is your native language?

- ☐ Cantonese
☐ English

☐ Other (please specify): _____

3. If English is your native language, in your opinion, which variety of English do you speak?

- ☐ American English
- ☐ British English
- ☐ Australian English
- ☐ New Zealand English
- ☐ Canadian English
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

4. If English is not your native language, did you learn English as a first or second/foreign language during your secondary education?

- ☐ As a first language
- ☐ As a second/foreign language
- ☐ Other (please specify -- as an Nth language): _____

5. For how many years have you lived in a country where English is spoken as the first language? _____ years

6. Age range: ☐ 25-35 ☐ 36-45 ☐ 46-55 ☐ 56-65

7. Gender: ☐ M ☐ F

8. Your teaching experience: (You may tick more than one item from the list.)

- ☐ I have taught English as a full-time teacher at a tertiary institution in a country where English is spoken as a first language (e.g., Australia) for _____ year(s)
- ☐ I have taught English as a full-time teacher at a tertiary institution in a country where English is spoken as a foreign/second language (e.g., Hong Kong) for _____ year(s)
- ☐ I have taught English as a part-time teacher at a tertiary institution in a country where English is spoken as a first language for _____ year(s)
- ☐ I have taught English as a part-time teacher at a tertiary institution in a country where English is spoken as a foreign/second language for _____ year(s)

You may use this blank page if you need additional space.

Your further suggestions and comments are most welcome. Thank you very much!

